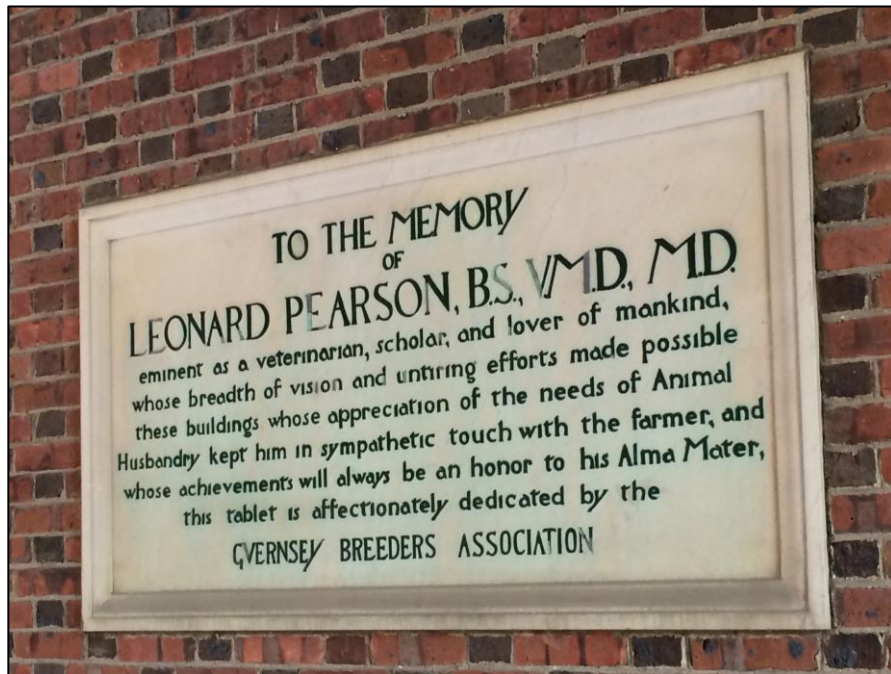


Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Dr. Leonard Pearson: The Untimely Death of the University of Pennsylvania's Third Dean

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
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During my recent visit to the University of Pennsylvania, I paused in the passageway near the historic quadrangle of the School of Veterinary Medicine and took a picture of this tribute to Leonard Pearson, the school's third dean. In 1909, the 12th year of his deanship, Pearson was returning from Europe by ship when he stopped in Nova Scotia for a period of rest. He traveled north to Newfoundland where he died on the morning of September 20, 1909.



Tribute to Leonard Pearson, third veterinary dean of the University of Pennsylvania
(Photo by the author, 2015)

One of the most scholarly, dedicated, and passionate veterinarians of the era, as well as among the most beloved, his untimely passing was considered one of most tragic losses of the fledgling profession.

A home-schooled student from Illinois, 16-year-old Pearson entered Cornell in 1884 and studied under Professor James Law, who would later become the principal (dean) of the New

York State Veterinary College. He received his BS after four years, then traveled to the University of Pennsylvania where he received the veterinary degree (VMD) in 1890. He was appointed dean in 1897. In recognition of his research work, Pearson was conferred the honorary doctor of medicine by the University of Pennsylvania in 1908, a year before his death. He was just 42.

He was remembered at his February 2nd, 1910 memorial service as one who knew who to,

*think, speak and write ... a captivating orator ... and possessed to a high degree of analysis, syntheses and generalization. The many abstract and complex problems filtered through his mind as a pure crystal. Speaking or writing, he reflected the exceptional qualities of his beautiful intellect.*¹

A “clear, earnest, enthusiastic teacher,”² Pearson had an unbridled passion for creating an effective learning environment for veterinary students. But he was equally committed to solving problems in livestock production and public health, some of the most challenging of the era.

Another dimension of Pearson’s life and memory will be the subject of a presentation on professionalism that I shall deliver to entering veterinary students during a guest lectureship this August. Though the topic is broad, after reading Pearson’s memorial tribute I have decided to assign portions of the tribute book to these nascent veterinarians so that we may discuss them in class. The collection of speeches and letters (available on line) represents inspiring reading for anyone in the healing professions, and especially for veterinarians.

In a paper presented at a conference at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in 2000, renowned University of Chicago ethicist Mark Siegler, MD, a member of the Ross University Board of Trustees (medical and veterinary colleges), maintained that “ideally, teaching about instruction in clinical medical ethics should include three dimensions: cognitive skills, behavioral skills; and character development and virtue”.³ Though Pearson “knew how to think, speak and write,” and would rank at the highest levels in the first two dimensions, it was his “character development and virtue” that notably received the most superlative accolades from his peers.

The University’s Provost described Pearson as someone who “understood men” and “was beloved by them.”⁴ Dr. Thomas Hunt of State College, Pennsylvania, said of him, “If any more lovable man has lived, I have not made his acquaintance.”⁵

And that is the dimension that I shall stress to the incoming veterinary students when I talk of professionalism. For without positive personal attributes, and notably love for all and not just close colleagues (which is something for which Pearson was lauded), we are but “sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal.” Pearson’s relationships with others were of a higher order, and we must also aspire to that if we are to become professionals of value and impact.

¹ Marshall, Clarence J, University of Pennsylvania and State Veterinarian of Pennsylvania. [Memorial Exercises](#), February 2, 1910, Houston Hall, University of Pennsylvania. Page 10.

² Vice Provost Smith, University of Pennsylvania, [Memorial Exercises](#), February 2, 1910, Houston Hall, University of Pennsylvania. Page 10.

³ Siegler, Mark. Training Doctors for Professionalism: Some Lessons from Teaching Clinical Medical Ethics. Mt Sinai J Med 2002 Nov 69(6) 404-9

⁴ Vice Provost Smith, University of Pennsylvania, Memorial Exercises, February 2, 1910, Houston Hall, University of Pennsylvania. Page 12.

⁵ Hunt, Thomas. University of Pennsylvania, [Memorial Exercises](#), February 2, 1910, Houston Hall, University of Pennsylvania. Page 22.

KEYWORDS:

Leonard Pearson
James Law
University of Pennsylvania
Cornell University
Mark Siegler

TOPIC:

Professionalism

LEADING QUESTION:

What early 20th century dean died in office at the University of Pennsylvania?

META-SUMMARY:

Leonard Pearson's death in 1909 was a major loss to the veterinary profession.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.